

UNION STATION PLAZA

(Columbus Plaza)

(Reservation No. 334)

First and E streets, Louisiana,

Delaware and Massachusetts avenues, NW  
Washington

District of Columbia

HABS NO. DC-694

HABS

DC

WASH,

641-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey

National Park Service

Department of the Interior

P.O. Box 37127

Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

UNION STATION PLAZA  
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Location: The convergence of First and E streets, Louisiana, Delaware and Massachusetts avenues, NE, on the south front of Union Station.

Owner/Manager: U.S. government, National Park Service.

Use: Ceremonial plaza.

Significance: This plaza was created as a result of the 1901-02 McMillan Commission plan for the city. Although not part of L'Enfant's plan, it was designed to embellish his plan and carry on its vision of grand spaces and vistas.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date: 1901, McMillan Plan.
2. Original and subsequent owners: Before the land was set aside for the national capital, this area was within a tract called Gordon's Meadow, patented to George Gordon in 1753.<sup>1</sup> Before the semicircular plaza was formed in the twentieth century, this area included several road right-of-ways, which were federal property and city blocks that were set aside for private development. The government began purchasing the city squares in 1901 after the site was selected for Union Station.
3. First improved: The plaza was first improved in 1908-12 in conjunction with the construction of Union Station.
4. Alterations and additions:

1902-08:	Union Station constructed.
1912:	Columbus Fountain completed and dedicated.
1975:	Flagpoles erected around the perimeter of the plaza to display flags of each state.
1981:	Replica of the Liberty Bell erected in the plaza.
1987-88:	Union Station restored and reopened.

B. Historical Context:

On Pierre L'Enfant's plan of Washington, Massachusetts Avenue bends

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<sup>1</sup> McNeil, 43, 47.

slightly to the south upon intersecting with Delaware Avenue in the northeast quadrant. A third diagonal avenue originates from this intersection and extends northeast to the city boundary. A large rectangular open space is created where these three avenues converge, but L'Enfant made no indications as to its embellishment. After L'Enfant was dismissed, Andrew Ellicott drew up a plan on which he straightened Massachusetts Avenue and eliminated the third avenue originating from this space. With this reconfiguration, the rectangular open space was significantly reduced to a small triangle.

Before the land for the city was transferred to the federal government, this planned intersection was part of Gordon's Meadow, a tract of land patented to George Gordon in 1753.<sup>2</sup> The land here was uneven, slashed by a creek that ran into the Tiber River to the southwest. In 1884, an artist painted a view of the Capitol from very near the site that is now Union Plaza, which depicts a pastoral setting of fields, brush, and grazing cattle. This area remained relatively undeveloped throughout the first half of the nineteenth century until the Baltimore and Ohio Railway laid tracks through it on the Delaware Avenue right-of-way between E and H streets around mid century (See Delaware Avenue, HABS No. DC-699).

The noisy, dirty tracks limited further development, leaving this neighborhood largely undeveloped as of 1901 when the McMillan Senate Commission sought a site for a large, central depot to serve all the railroads in the city. During the second half of the nineteenth century, competing companies laid railroad tracks and built depots throughout the city--one depot was even built on the Mall, with tracks running through the public park. The McMillan Senate Commission, formed in 1901 to examine the city and make plans for its development and beautification, vowed to restore the vision for the city set out by L'Enfant a century earlier. One of the committee's strongest recommendations, as well as the first to transpire, was the removal of the railroad tracks and depot on the Mall.

The McMillan Commission--including designers Daniel Burnham, Charles McKim, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and Auguste St. Gaudens--selected this site along Massachusetts Avenue at the intersection of Delaware Avenue and First and E streets (See Massachusetts Avenue, HABS No. DC-703). The station would face southwest toward the Capitol with the tracks running to its rear. Its massive bulk would shield the grand central core of the city from the clamor and filth of the rails. The federal government began acquiring the land for the station in 1902, although much of it was already federally owned since it encompassed the wide rights-of-way of Massachusetts and Delaware avenues. Construction on the station was begun in 1902 and it was completed in 1908. Commission member Daniel Burnham designed the grand Neoclassical structure and St. Gaudens designed the sculptures that enliven its facade and interior.

The white granite station, which combines the form of Roman bath and a triumphal arch, embodies the ideals of the City Beautiful movement popularized by the pivotal 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago honoring the quadrennial of Christopher Columbus' momentous voyage. Burnham, St. Gaudens and the other members of the McMillan Commission were instrumental in the design of the exposition, and their new plan for Washington fully embraced the design tenets that surfaced almost a decade before in Chicago. As if to emphasize

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<sup>2</sup> McNeil, 43, 47.

this connection, the large plaza in front of the Burnham's station honors Christopher Columbus.

Congress approved the site for a fountain to honor Columbus on March 4, 1907, and it was completed in time for dedication June 8, 1912. Sculptor Lored Z. Taft designed the large Vermont marble memorial that consists of a 45'-tall shaft and a large semicircular fountain. The bow of a ship projects over the fountain from the base of the shaft, with Christopher Columbus standing upon it facing southwest to the Capitol. Allegorical statues of the old and new worlds embellish the sides of the shaft and it is surmounted by a globe supported by four eagles. The fountain was probably influenced by a similar monument at the 1893 fair in Chicago by sculptor Frederick MacMonnies.<sup>3</sup>

The large semicircular plaza that provided a forecourt for Burnham's impressive station and a setting for the Columbus fountain was an engineering feat in itself. Since the ground surrounding the station was uneven, all roads leading to it had to be regraded to form a level space for the plaza.<sup>4</sup> The plaza was designed both to control the traffic approaching the station and to provide a grand entry for visitors to the city. In the spirit of L'Enfant's monumental spaces, radial avenues, and vistas, First Street, Delaware Avenue and two segments of Massachusetts Avenue radiate from the plaza like spokes of a wheel; the station is oriented to face directly down Delaware Avenue which provides a clear reciprocal vista to the Capitol. An additional boulevard (later Louisiana Avenue) was to be created to connect the station with the Mall and Pennsylvania Avenue. To further emphasize the grandeur of the area, in 1910 the federal government acquired twelve city squares in the fan-shaped region between the station and the Capitol to create more parkland connecting the two important structures.

Surrounded by a landscaped expanse, most of the plaza surface was covered with pavement in anticipation of large ceremonial gatherings. Large beds were included to break up the mass of paving with shrubs and seasonal plantings. Elegant Neoclassical balustrades follow the curve of semicircular extensions on each side of the plaza that feature large round fountain bowls. The Vermont white granite used for the balustrades and the shallow semicircular steps is from the same quarry as the stone used for the station; the fountain bowls are Maine green granite.<sup>5</sup> Three 110'-tall flagpoles with ornate bronze bases designed by Burnham and Co. were erected near the center of the plaza.

Since the station was to become a major transportation hub, the plaza was also designed to accommodate trolleys and automobiles picking up and discharging passengers. Eight oval and circular traffic islands were formed beyond the plaza to divide streetcar tracks running along the outside from automobiles on the inner circuit. Each island was sodded and surrounded by perimeter sidewalks and trespassing wires. Pairs of Millet double-globe lamps erected in the oval islands illuminated the roadway.

Soon after the plaza was completed, the United States entered World War I and a large complex of temporary structures, called the Union Plaza Dormitories

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<sup>3</sup> Goode, *Outdoor Sculpture*, 44.

<sup>4</sup> Caemmerer, 338-39.

<sup>5</sup> Caemmerer, 339.

were erected to house women who came to the city to assist with the war effort.<sup>6</sup> The demolition of these "tempos" in 1930 finally allowed for clearing the path for Louisiana Avenue to connect the station to the Mall. Throughout the 1930s the station reached its height of activity, serving as many as 285 passenger trains each day and an estimated 10.9 million travelers.<sup>7</sup>

By the 1960s, however, train travel was on the decline, and the station had fallen into disrepair. The Metrorail subway system, begun in the early 1970s, included a station beneath the aging structure, and a visitors center was constructed in the basement of the station in time for Bicentennial celebrations in 1976. Also in preparation for the celebrations, flags for every state in the Union were raised on flagpoles erected around the perimeter of the plaza in 1975. The station itself was declared uninhabitable, however, and the trains, Metro, and visitors center were accessible through temporary covered passageways.

The visitors center was a complete failure. Coincidentally, however, the popularity of train and Metro travel increased in the 1980s, and the Union Station Redevelopment Corporation made plans to renovate the station. The multimillion dollar effort undertaken by the architectural firm of Harry Weese and Associates yielded a newly restored train station and elegant shopping mall that opened in October 1988.<sup>8</sup>

The plaza in front of the station was refurbished along with the renovation, but remains much the same as when it was first built. After the streetcar tracks were removed around its perimeter, the oval and circular islands were eliminated and the entire roadway reconfigured to distribute automotive traffic. A large sodded crescent now divides station traffic from the flow of Massachusetts Avenue; a Belgian-block median beyond separates eastbound and westbound traffic on the avenue.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

- A. Overall dimensions: The semicircular plaza and adjacent traffic islands covers a total area of 3.61 acres.
- B. Materials:
  - 1. Pathways, paving: Most of the plaza is paved in brick. The semicircular steps leading down a slight incline are white granite. The surrounding directional medians and islands are paved with Belgian blocks and concrete pavers.
  - 2. Vegetation:
    - a. Grass: Sodded rectangular panels lead to the fountains on each side of the plaza. Four smaller sodded panels are situated around the perimeter of the plaza between wide paths fanning out from the

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<sup>6</sup> Goode, Capital Losses, 444.

<sup>7</sup> Grosvenor, 522.

<sup>8</sup> Kohler, 189.

station. The large semicircular median separating station traffic from Massachusetts Avenue is also sodded.

- b. Trees, shrubs, hedges: The entire plaza features only two small trees planted in cutouts in two of the traffic islands on the extreme northwest and southeast ends of the space. Four shrub beds line the inner edges of the four grass panels near the plaza's perimeter. A formal hedge lines the inside of the large sodded semicircular traffic divider, and scattered shrubs are planted in three of the traffic islands.
- c. Flowers, seasonal plantings: Four large panels toward the center of the plaza and a strip along the northeast side are planted with rose bushes. Flowers are planted seasonally in beds in the four panels near the plaza perimeter.

3. Structures:

- a. Fences, balustrades: A metal picket fence runs between the roadway and the hedge along the inside edge of the semicircular median. Elegant Vermont white granite balustrades frame each side of the plaza.
- b. Benches: The only seating in the plaza are marble benches incorporated in the back of the Columbus fountain.
- c. Statues, markers, monuments: A replica of the Liberty Bell stands behind the Columbus Fountain near the center of the plaza. A bronze plaque mounted in the sidewalk below states that the "Freedom Bell" was dedicated to the spirit of the Bicentennial and given by the American Legion and the American Legion Auxiliary in 1981.
- d. Fountains, pools: The semi-circular marble Christopher Columbus Memorial Fountain is 66'-wide and 43' tall. It is constructed of Vermont white marble and was completed in 1912.  
Two circular fountains at each side of the plaza are constructed of Maine green granite. The upper bowls are 13' in diameter and the lower bowls are 22' 6" in diameter.
- e. Lighting: Twelve double-standard Washington Globe lights illuminate the central plaza. Additional lights along the sodded and paved medians light Massachusetts Avenue. Paired 30'-tall ornamental rostral columns surmounted by eagles stand atop the balustrades flanking the carriage entrances at each end of the station. These are fitted with paired spherical lamps and are flanked by lampposts with similar fixtures.

C. Site:

- 1. Character of surrounding structures: The arrangement of the roadways

leading to the station create seven wedge-shaped blocks radiating from the plaza area. Parkland fills the two blocks immediately southwest of the plaza. These landscaped blocks are flanked by one triangular block to the southeast and two to the northwest that are used as parking lots. The block on the east side of the station is filled by the Federal Judiciary Building, completed in 1992; the block on the northwest side is filled by the Washington City Post Office Building, designed by Burnham and completed in 1914. Flagpoles flying flags for each state in the Union stand in a continuous line along the edge of each of these blocks forming a semicircle around the plaza.

2. Traffic patterns: Because the park is in front of a train and Metrorail station, it receives a high volume of buses, taxis, automobiles, and pedestrians. For users of the station, three separated lanes--all one-way northwest--run between the plaza and the station. Directly in front of the plaza is a two-lane roadway with limited parking, for egress from the station for automobiles and buses. Massachusetts Avenue is diverted around the semicircular space in three-lanes in both directions divided by a Belgian-block median.
3. Vistas: Stanton Square is barely visible along Massachusetts Avenue from the southeast side of the plaza. The Capitol is in clear view along Delaware Avenue from the center of the plaza. Louisiana Avenue provides a clear path to the Mall, but the vista is not defined by a particular terminus.

### PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

#### A. Maps:

Boschke, A. "Topographical Map of the District of Columbia surveyed in the years '57, '58, and '59."

Ellicott, Andrew. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1792.

L'Enfant, Pierre Charles. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1791.

Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. "Map of the City of Washington showing the Public Reservations Under Control of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds." 1884, 1887, and 1894.

- #### B. Park plans:
- See Supplemental Information below for a list of attached plans and early views. Additional plans are located at the Office of Land Use, National Capital Region.

#### C. Early Views:

1844: Painting of the area that would become Union Plaza, by William McLeod, (Diplomatic Reception Rooms, U.S. Department of State). See Supplemental Information for photocopy.

ca. 1912: Photograph of Union Station and Plaza (Library of Congress).

- ca. 1925: Aerial Photograph of Union Station (Goode, Capital Losses, 445).
- ca. 1925: View of one of the oval traffic islands surrounding the station (Goode, Capital Losses, 444).
- 1929: Aerial view of Union Station and plaza, (Office of Land Use, NPS) See Supplemental Information for attached photocopy.
- ca. 1931: Aerial view looking toward the Capital from above Union Station (Grosvenor, 522).

D. Bibliography:

- Annual Reports of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. Annual Reports of the Chief of Engineers. 1867-1933.
- Caemmerer, H. P. Washington, The National Capital. Washington, D.C.: Commission of Fine Arts, 1932.
- Goode, James. Capital Losses. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979.
- Goode, James M. The Outdoor Sculpture of Washington, D.C. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1974.
- Grosvenor, Gilbert. "Washington Through the Years." The National Geographic Magazine. Vol. 55 No. 5 (November 1931): 517-619.
- Kohler, Sue A. The Commission of Fine Arts. Washington, D.C.: Commission of Fine Arts, 1990.
- McNeil, Priscilla W. "Rock Creek Hundred: Land Conveyed for the Federal City." Washington History 3 (Spring/Summer), 1991.
- Record Group 42, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA RG42).
- Reservation Files. National Capital Region Headquarters, Land Use Office.

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National Park Service  
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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:

The Plan of Washington, D.C., project was carried out from 1990-93 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division, Robert J. Kapsch, chief. The project sponsors were the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Inc. of Washington, D.C.; the Historic Preservation Division, District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, which provided Historic Preservation Fund monies; the National Capital Region and its White House Liaison office, NPS; and the National



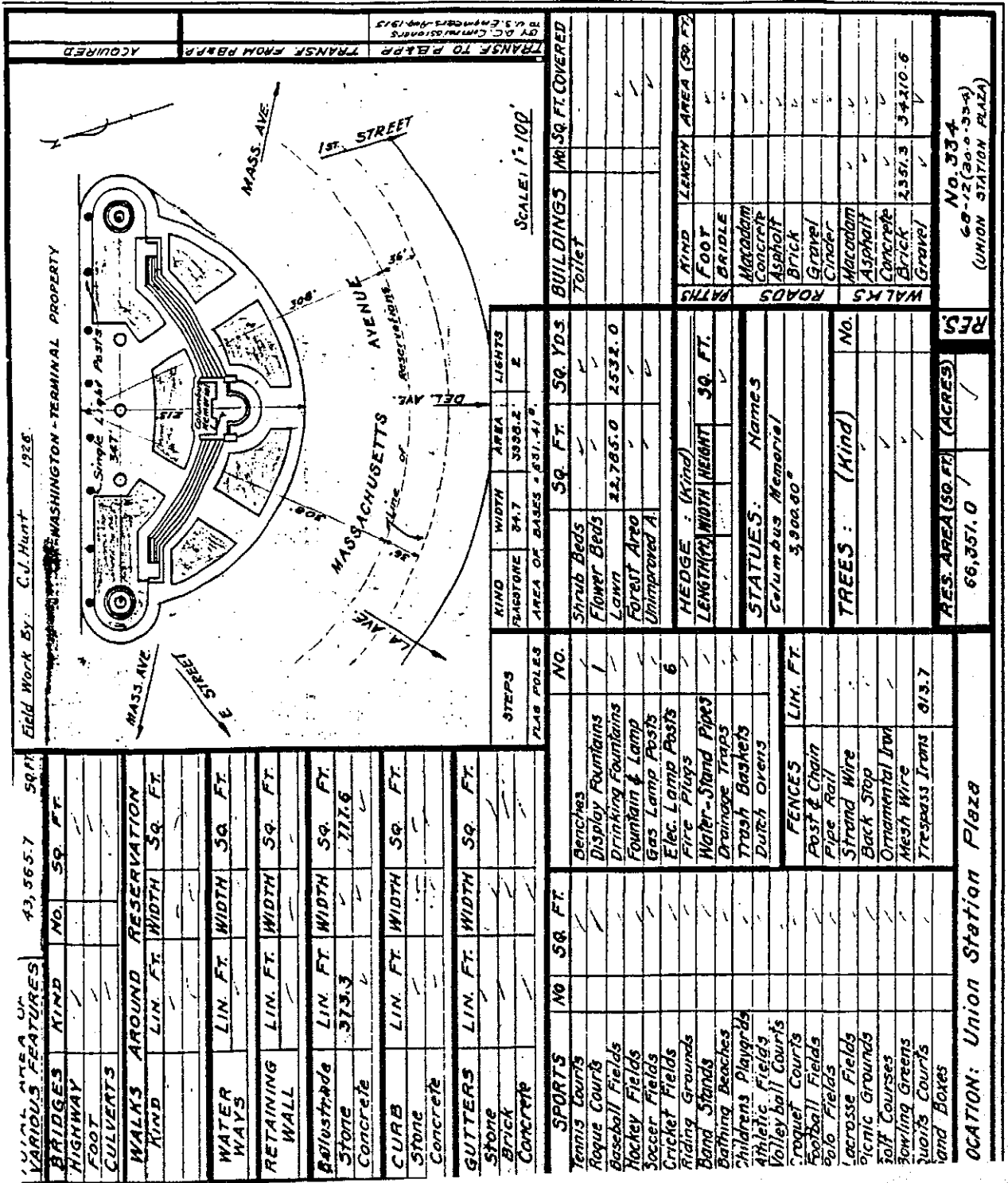
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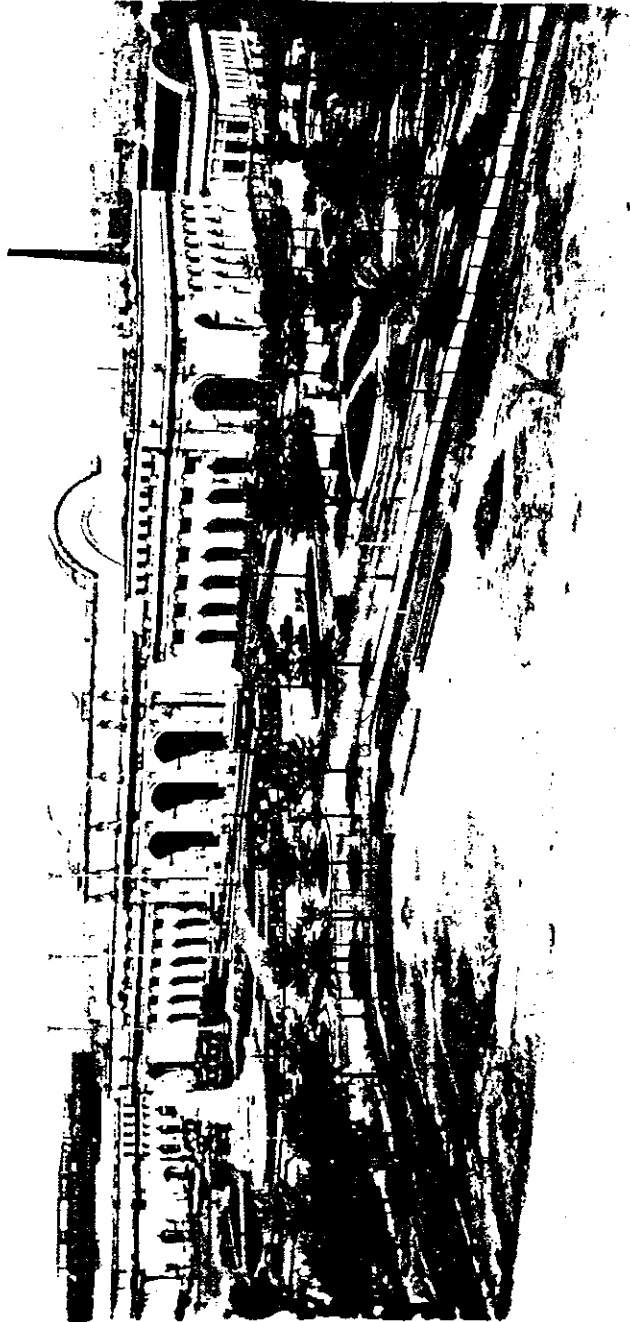
HABS historian Sara Amy Leach was the project leader and Elizabeth J. Barthold was project historian. Architectural delineators were: Robert Arzola, HABS; Julianne Jorgensen, University of Maryland; Robert Juskevich, Catholic University of America; Sandra M. E. Leiva, US/ICOMOS-Argentina; and Tomasz Zweich, US/ICOMOS-Poland, Board of Historical Gardens and Palace Conservation. Katherine Grandine served as a data collector. The photographs are by John McWilliams, Atlanta, except for the aerial views, which are by Jack E. Boucher, HABS, courtesy of the U.S. Park Police - Aviation Division.

PART V. SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

Page 9	1844:	Painting of the area that would become Union Plaza, by William McLeod, (Diplomatic Reception Rooms, U.S. Department of State).
Page 10	ca. 1926:	Park plan showing path layout and park features (NPS Reservation Files).
Page 11	1929:	Aerial view of Union Station and plaza (NPS Reservation Files).







VIEW OF UNION STATION  
— PLAZA —  
SHOWING COLUMBUS STATUE  
*April 13, 1929*